

2012

Justice in the gutter: representing everyday trauma in the graphic novels of Art Spiegelman

Karen Crawley
Griffith University

Honni van Rijswijk
University of Technology, Sydney

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/ltc>

Recommended Citation

Crawley, Karen and van Rijswijk, Honni, Justice in the gutter: representing everyday trauma in the graphic novels of Art Spiegelman, *Law Text Culture*, 16, 2012, 93-118.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/ltc/vol16/iss1/6>

Justice in the gutter: representing everyday trauma in the graphic novels of Art Spiegelman

Abstract

Trauma studies has had a long relationship with legal studies. Shoshana Felman argues that 'trauma – individual as well as social – is the basic underlying reality of the law' (2002: 172). The law has made available certain forms for the representation and adjudication of traumatic experience. Among others, testimony and the trial are legal forms that offer the potential for justice for traumatic events, at the same time that they delimit the ways in which trauma can be understood (Felman 2002; Sarat et al 2007). The means by which trauma is represented determines which experiences are privileged and recognized – which also means that some harms will become invisible under certain frameworks. Scholars working at the intersection of law and trauma have often turned to literature to supplement the law's version of justice.

Justice in the Gutter: Representing Everyday Trauma in the Graphic Novels of Art Spiegelman

Karen Crawley and Honni van Rijswijk

Introduction: What Do Comics Have to Do With Justice?

Trauma studies has had a long relationship with legal studies. Shoshana Felman argues that ‘trauma – individual as well as social – is the basic underlying reality of the law’ (2002: 172). The law has made available certain forms for the representation and adjudication of traumatic experience. Among others, testimony and the trial are legal forms that offer the potential for justice for traumatic events, at the same time that they delimit the ways in which trauma can be understood (Felman 2002; Sarat et al 2007). The means by which trauma is represented determines which experiences are privileged and recognized – which also means that some harms will become invisible under certain frameworks. Scholars working at the intersection of law and trauma have often turned to literature to supplement the law’s version of justice. In *Residues of Justice*, Wai Chee Dimock argues that for the law,

the search for justice... is very much an exercise in abstraction, and perhaps an exercise in reduction as well, stripping away apparent differences to reveal an underlying order, an order intelligible, in the

long run, perhaps only in quantitative terms (Dimock 1996: 2).

The law pays attention to particularities only to instrumentalise them and make them universal, whereas literature is able to capture particular, material experiences in ways that elude 'universalising' tendencies. Dimock argues that literature supplements the law through its attention to the 'incommensurate' particularities excluded by the law (1996: 10) and thereby contributes to a more complex and layered version of justice. She looks to literature for 'the abiding presence – the desolation as well as the consolation – of what remains unredressed, unrecovered, noncorresponding' in the law (1996: 6). Literature provides an alternate domain and language for justice, one that offers different histories and logics to those upon which the law relies. It can thereby provide a domain where that which has been excluded by the law can become the source of an alternative justice.

Scholars working at the intersection of law and trauma, then, turn to literature in pursuit of justice for those experiences that existing frameworks seem incapable of representing and adjudicating. In this article, we consider what the unique formal properties of comics – which we refer to here as graphic novels¹ – might bring to this pursuit, by reference to Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1996) and *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004). *Maus* is frequently credited with having legitimised graphic novels as a form worthy of sustained academic attention (Chute 2007: 229). Scholars have long investigated the themes of trauma, memory, and intergenerational effects in Spiegelman's work (Hirsch 1993, Brown 1998, Young 1998). More recently, scholars have considered how the formal properties of his graphic novels convey the problems of representing trauma in its subjective, visual, temporal and spatial dimensions (McGlothlin 2003, Chute 2006, Espiritu 2006, Versluys 2006, Orbán 2007, Gournelos 2011). Here, we draw on this work to examine how *Maus* and *In the Shadow of No Towers* offer a critique of the underlying model of trauma upon which law relies. We argue that the texts suggest alternative understandings of trauma in a mode which is particularly instructive for law. Although Spiegelman organizes his treatment of trauma through specific events that have

defined the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – the Holocaust and 9/11 – he represents the impact, as well as the ethical and aesthetic questions of these experiences, in ways that radically challenge the supremacy of the event by showing how the event fails to be contained.

This article proceeds in four parts. In part 1 we consider how the law's model of trauma is marked by an aesthetic of containment, an artificial threshold of legibility which recognises only traumatic experiences that are distinct, linear, and capable of separation into binary categories of cause and effect, villain and victim, event and aftermath. We demonstrate how the turn to 'the everyday' in trauma studies offers a way of conceiving a more nuanced approach to trauma. In part 2 we explore practices of representing trauma in literature and suggest that the formal properties of graphic novels make available an aesthetic of connection. By placing the trauma of the event alongside pervasive 'everyday' traumas, these texts can hold together a number of temporal effects and relationships both visually and affectively. In parts 3 and 4 we proceed through close readings of *Maus* and *In the Shadow of No Towers* to demonstrate how these texts formally, stylistically and thematically explore the problems of representing trauma, and confront us with the political and ideological implications of privileging certain types of trauma. The Holocaust and 9/11 are both considered limit events, events which are so traumatic that they shatter the individual's symbolic resources and escape our normal modes of meaning-making and cognition (Versluys: 968). Spiegelman's works are each concerned with a different mode of representing these events: *Maus* is concerned with reconstructing the past, *No Towers* with witnessing the present. Spiegelman uses the formal properties of graphic novels to connect the trauma of the events of the Holocaust or 9/11 to the everyday suffering of contemporary racism and xenophobia, at material and affective levels. Graphic novels can resist law's demands for interpretative and normative finality by drawing our attention to the structural or endemic traumas which constitute legal subjectivity, and the representational practices through which meaning – and justice – become possible.

1 Law's Model of Trauma and the Critique of the Everyday

In both law and trauma studies, trauma is frequently conceived of through the paradigm of an 'event' which can be defined as an exceptional rupture of experience, a failure of the normal or a break in the process of self-creation on which we rely to operate in daily life. The boundaries of what constitutes 'trauma' thus reflect a conceptual binary between the exceptional and the everyday. This conception of trauma reflects a worldview based on the Newtonian model of physics, which privileges forces acting on bodies in a one-off event (like a sudden explosion) rather than a world composed in relational terms of an ecology or a network, marked by cumulative and threshold effects (like the proverbial frog in boiling water). At the same time, there has been an increasing understanding of the many different kinds of suffering that do not fit this model. In particular, there have been moves to try to understand the kind of suffering that is endemic and ongoing, rather than discrete – the trauma experiences of people who never experience a 'normal' that can be interrupted. Critical trauma theorists have shown that both scholarly and cultural practices often privilege narratives of trauma in which trauma is depicted as a rupturing, aberrant event. These narratives overlook the fact that suffering is pervasive and ever-present in the lives of many people. In 2008, Michael Rothberg pointed out 'the need to supplement the event-based model of trauma that has become dominant over the past fifteen years with a model that can account for ongoing, everyday forms of traumatizing violence as well' (2008: 226). Accordingly, scholars are increasingly turning to 'the everyday' as a problematic, promoting 'an ethics and politics of everyday life that is not simply subordinated to sublime, ecstatic, or peak experiences' (LaCapra 2001: 15).

The law, however, deals poorly with endemic trauma. The law's focus falls on the discrete event, rather than on continuing conditions. Substantive legal claims and formal proceedings that support these assertions focus on carving out specific and exceptional events from a surrounding norm. The traumatic figures of interruption, crisis,

accident or violence arise in the law as distinct events. Thus, the individual or collective body subjected to trauma is assumed to be originally whole and integral, subsequently violated by an external catastrophe. This model of trauma fits well with violence that is unusual, singular, and confined to a short period of time. However, it fails to accurately conceptualise the experiences of those who never experience an initial, integral state, such as people who are subjected to endemic and structural racism or sexism. For these people, trauma is not experienced as a 'separate' effect of personhood, but is productive of subjectivity. It is important to questions of justice that we do not take the underlying state that is categorized as 'trauma' for granted. Instead, we must examine closely the implications of privileging certain kinds of narratives, events and subjects in theories of trauma. Recent scholarship in trauma and postcolonial studies has called for more inclusive and specific paradigms in order to encompass the multiple social fractures that trauma inflicts (Baxter 2011). Dominick LaCapra has focused particularly on interpretations of the Holocaust in trauma studies, specifically the tension between the Holocaust as a paradigmatic limit-case event, and its historical specificity (2001: 5-7). He argues that trauma theory often risks stripping events of their specificity (2001: 72-80). The move towards a 'trauma of the everyday' has a significant political dimension, as implicit in this move is the claim that the law should open up to the perspectives of new forms of suffering and subjectivity. This more complete justice would take on the ethical and representational demands of a more nuanced and complex theory of trauma, as well as the political implications embedded in representational choices.

The effect of law's treatment of trauma, and specifically its privileging of certain kinds of harm, has been noted by feminist legal scholars. Some have argued that international criminal law and transitional justice initiatives tend to focus on extreme acts of criminal violence rather than the structural, endemic or everyday violence which forms their less visible but necessary condition (Ross: 87-89; Ní Aoláin: 239-243). Writing in the context of tort law, Barbara Hocking and Alison Smith argue that the requirement of a clear event in nervous

shock law – which requires that the injury be caused by a sudden, discrete accident and lead to a definable psychiatric injury – especially disadvantages women, since it fails to capture the kinds of harms more likely to be endured by women, such as the toll of undertaking the role of carer (Hocking and Smith 1995: 120). Laura Brown has argued that psychological definitions of trauma that emphasise the irregular and unusual event over the ‘everyday’ have served to obscure experiences such as sexual violence that are not statistically unusual, and which so many women suffer (Brown 1995: 100–101). Brown argues that:

the range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of men of the dominant class; white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men. Trauma is thus that which disrupts these human lives, but not other (Brown 1995: 101).

Ann Cvetkovich compares the difficulty of representing trauma outside the ‘event’ with the historical and political division between public and private domains:

More so than distinctions between private and public trauma, those between trauma as everyday and ongoing and trauma as a discrete event may be the most profound consequence of a gendered approach (Cvetkovich 2002: 33).

Brown and Cvetkovich are particularly concerned with the negative effects of this distinction on the recognition of gendered harms. Cvetkovich argues that the way through these problems is not to equate sexual trauma with other traumas, but rather recognize ‘trauma’s specificities and variations’ (Cvetkovich 2002: 3). That is, we ought to theorise from the specific, rather than use the specific to supplement a ‘universal’ theory of justice. In this way, ‘trauma challenges common understandings of what constitutes an archive’ (Cvetkovich 2002: 7).

In addition to critiques based on gender, scholars have explored the issue of everyday trauma using categories of race and class. For example, Dorothy Stringer examines sexual oppression, racial oppression and racialised poverty as states of continuing trauma through the work of William Faulkner (2010). In the context of the Stolen Generations

in Australia, Rosanne Kennedy has argued that the courts have been overly legalistic and narrow in their approach to witnesses' articulation of trauma, in contrast to cultural testimonies which have sought to engage the wider community in an understanding of the ongoing harms of past practices of child removal (2008). This scholarship points to the need to consider carefully the kinds of harm and subjectivities which are made visible (or invisible) by different representational practices. What are the historical conditions that produce trauma theories (and exemplary literary representations) and how have these defined their possibilities and limitations? What is at stake in replacing an emphasis on 'the event' with a focus on everyday, routinised suffering as the organizing problematic for trauma?

2 Representing Trauma and the Form of the Graphic Novel

In order to begin to answer these questions, we first need to revisit the nature of trauma, including claims that trauma states are inherently difficult to represent. We will then examine the ways in which the comic form has been used to facilitate representation of traumatic experience. Trauma has long been seen as presenting a crisis in representation, as a state that is unable to be pinned down or captured by the formal properties of language and symbolic expression. The dominant figure of trauma is an aporia or disruption of symbolic means: a failure of language or a 'gap' in language. In her seminal work, Cathy Caruth argues that trauma ruptures the narrative continuity of cultural and legal realities, producing 'a crisis that is marked, not by simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness' (1996: 5). Harm is conceptualized by trauma theories as experiences which, because of their previously unthinkable nature, are not available to immediate understanding. Rather, the event is recorded by the psyche in ways that are repetitive and unsynthesised. As Felman writes, the traumatic event 'registers a belated impact: it becomes precisely haunting, tends to historically return and to repeat itself in practice and in act, to the precise extent that it remains un-

owned and unavailable to knowledge and to consciousness' (2002: 174).

The paradox of trauma is that it cannot be represented – and yet it *must* be. Caruth argues that 'to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event' (1995: 4-5). Any attempts to re-enact traumatic events, through testimony or other forms of representation, provide a way to 'bear witness to a past that was never fully experienced as it occurred' (1995: 151). Trauma calls for acknowledgement, and trauma testimony imports an ethical obligation for others to bear witness to it and to participate in its reconstruction. The narrative of trauma made available through testimony generates our very knowledge of that trauma, which emerges out of a void. Such testimony begins 'with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence ... the emergence of the narrative which is being listened to – and heard – is, therefore, the process and place wherein cognizance, the "knowing" of the event is given birth to' (Laub and Felman 1992: 57). Caruth believes that the traumatic crisis must 'be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims our understanding' (1996: 5). In her theorisation, literature and trauma intersect at 'the complex relation between knowing and not knowing' (1996: 3).

Trauma studies scholars are thus acutely interested in literary and artistic representations that 'disrupt the facile linear progression' of narrative, 'introduce alternative interpretations,' and 'withstand the need for closure' (Friedlander qtd in Young 1998: 667). According to Anne Whitehead, 'the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection' (2004: 3). The formal properties of comics are particularly interesting in this regard. Comics are self-consciously non-realist and rely on a dialectic relationship between image and text. Spiegelman prefers the term 'comix' for this mixture of pictures and words (LaCapra 2001: 145, Young 1998: 672), eschewing the idea that comics must be comical – humorous or lighthearted – in favour of an emphasis on their formal qualities and the artistic possibilities

they harbour. Spiegelman responded to the Holocaust's crisis in representation by asserting that comics can approach trauma through formal means, by exploiting 'panel size, panel rhythms, and visual structures of the page' (qtd Chute 2006: 200). Likewise, as Hillary Chute notes, *No Towers* is 'riveted to showing the efficacy of the comic medium for traumatic representation' (2007: 236).

The reader of a graphic novel is an active participant in the construction of meaning at multiple simultaneous levels. The combination of pictures (or received information, meaning the message is instantaneous) and writing (or perceived information, requiring decoding) (McCloud 1993: 49) makes reading comics an activity which takes place in different time frames: one can look at the images, then the text, or read both together, or sequentially. Multiple timeframes are also evident in the comic's panels which convey information in both vertical and horizontal movements of the eye, as well as in the analogue of images implied by the entire page appearing in the background of any single panel. The visual arrangement of comics allows the simultaneity of past and present to be captured in ways that linear narrative cannot (McCloud 1993: 104; Chute 2006: 201-2). The comic page's formal capabilities thus enable the spatial representation of time to be multiple and relational, ideal for expressing the 'symptoms' of disjunctive 'temporality and causality' that characterize narratives of trauma (Whitehead 2004: 6). In both *Maus* and *No Towers*, Spiegelman 'makes interlacing temporalities part of the text's very structure' (Chute 2007: 230). The increased flexibility and non-linear movement of reading comics encourages the reader's awareness of the 'representedness' of the trauma with which they are engaging.

Comics are composed by panels – also called frames – and by 'the rich empty spaces between the selected moments that direct our interpretation' (Chute 2006: 202). Comic theorist Scott McCloud calls these empty spaces 'the gutter,' in which

human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea.... Closure allows us to connect these [fragmented] moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality. If visual

iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar. . . .
The reader's deliberate, voluntary closure is comics' primary means of
simulating time and motion (1993: 66-69).

The comix form requires the viewer's active mental participation in order to fill in the gaps between panels; these gaps are essential because they generate the desire for meaningful revelation (McCloud 1993: 59). Since trauma breaks down this very possibility of closure, the comix form provides the means to access and play with this level of meaning-making. In other words, the reader/viewer must actively construct the narrative and the event, which at a very basic level is 'undone' or de-naturalised by the experience. The graphic novel develops a long, narrative arc but the story develops through constant discontinuity – and the thematising of this discontinuity. The frames and gutters denaturalize the progression of the story, alerting the reader to the constant negotiation of event/everyday, past/present, and the difficulty of upholding those distinctions. These techniques move beyond realist practices to open up new experiences of reading, making available various, radical modes for the artist to not only experiment with the representation of trauma, but also to thematise the act of representing trauma. These techniques provide to readers a 'meta' and critical experience of their engagement with the material (and with the 'event' that provokes each work). These practices work towards forms of 'justice in the gutter' – they invite the reader to notice how trauma is 'produced' as a representation. They encourage the reader to notice what is included and emphasized in the representation, and what is left out or only semi-formed.

3 *Maus*: The Past Bleeds into the Present

As James Young observes, *Maus* is not about the Holocaust so much as it is about the survivor's tale itself and the artist-son's recovery of it (Young 1998: 670). As his father told his experiences to Art, Art tells his experiences of the storytelling sessions themselves. The visual intersection of past and present is represented in the architecture of panels. *Maus* is a narrative that tells the story of both past events as well

as its own unfolding as narrative, reminding the reader that Vladek's account does not chronicle the past, but constructs it. Chute argues that *Maus* engages with the ethical dilemma of how to portray the past through the formal complexities of the comic book page, approaching history through its spatiality (2006: 201-2).

Cartooned images work on abstraction and iconicity rather than realism; they strip down to an essential meaning and then amplify that meaning (McCloud 1993: 30). This enables the accentuation of particular features: Spiegelman's Jews are mice, his Nazis are cats, his Poles are pigs and his Americans are dogs. He draws himself as an anthropomorphised mouse. Icons demand our participation to make them meaningful; the detailed background of the panels in *Maus* contrast with the highly abstracted mouse-features which invite identification (McCloud 1993: 59). When Spiegelman was asked, 'Why mice?' he answered, 'I need to show the events and memory of the Holocaust without showing them. I want to show the masking of these events in their representation' (interview with Young 1998: 687). His occasional foregrounding of these 'masks' – by showing the string which attaches them to the heads of the figures – 'ejects the reader from the complacency of the animal metaphor and points to both its artifice and its effectiveness as a normalized aesthetic device' (McGlothlin 2003: 183), powerfully suggesting that people are divided by nationalities and by culturally-constructed, politically-exploited stereotypes.

The emotional impact of *Maus* lies in Spiegelman's refusal to sentimentalize or sanctify the survivor, his father (Chute 2006: 225). During the war Vladek lost his six-year-old son, Richieu, and most of his extended family, and endured months of terror and starvation at Auschwitz-Birkenau and, later, Dachau. But unimaginable suffering, Spiegelman insists, 'doesn't make you better, it just makes you suffer' (Spiegelman 2011: 36). Vladek's story of living in Europe before and during the war is interspersed with his later life in the United States, in which Vladek has become an exasperating old man: stubborn, miserly, judgmental, and manipulative. He bullies his second wife, Mala, another Holocaust survivor, and places unreasonable demands on his

son, Art. The text affords no narrative arc of redemption: Vladek seems unable to respond to his own story, unable to editorialize or process or learn from it, and the reader is left waiting for resolution through a catharsis or connection which never happens. Vladek does not redeem himself – indeed Art calls him a ‘murderer’ for destroying his wife’s diaries and with them, her own narrative. The book enacts a constant transition between a horrific past and an everyday that is resolutely quotidian and banal: Vladek interrupts his account to scold Art for dropping ash on the carpet, and uses it as an occasion to complain about Mala’s cleaning habits (1996: 54). The much noted ‘temporal blurring’ in *Maus* does not offer an easy bridge between past and present, but rather enacts their incommensurability (McGlothlin 2003: 180). By suggesting the ‘victim’s’ lack of moral authority, Spiegelman forces the reader to confront ‘our own need for redemptory closure’ (Young 1998: 696).

Book II Chapter II, called ‘Auschwitz: Time Flies’ does not follow the usual switching between past and present, but begins with a meta-narrative which takes place in 1987, one year after the publication of *Maus I* and five years after Vladek’s death. This section deals directly with Art’s anxieties about the book’s publication. Art is sitting over a drawing table smoking, now portrayed as a human in a mouse’s mask, with flies buzzing around his head. Vladek died of a heart attack in 1982, he writes, and he and Francoise are expecting their first child in a few months. As the focus zooms outwards from panel to panel, more of Art becomes visible, until in the final panel, we have the full view of Art sitting hunched over his desk, and the origin of the flies becomes clear: Art’s table is resting on a mound of naked mouse corpses, and a watchtower ringed with barbed wire is visible to the right. The different temporal planes of the Holocaust and the present coexist in the same image, situating the reader within ‘a temporality in which the Holocaust past is felt as a present force, a residue of the *then* that is keenly perceived as existent in the *now*’ (McGlothlin 2003: 191).

In another scene, Francoise peeks into Art’s studio and asks ‘Want some coffee?’ Art is replaying the tape recording in which his father describes the moments before his brother was killed: ‘And then she

said, 'No! I will not go in the gas chambers. And my children will not ... [click]'. Art turns off the cassette and answers enthusiastically, 'You bet!' (1996: 280). By conveying this scene, Spiegelman acknowledges the troubling ease with which he assimilates his father's horrific stories. *Maus* resists and refuses closure, works against an idea of narrative as 'healing', and explores alternative ways of telling stories.

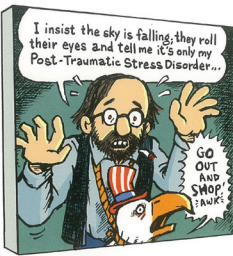
The co-implication of the event of the Holocaust and the everyday trauma that has followed it is explored at the level of both theme and form in *Maus*. The visual modes of the comix form make available new ways to push into and against 'the unrepresentable'. The story of *Maus* emphasizes the 'normality' of the Holocaust as we witness Art struggling with his own experiences of transgenerational trauma, as well as the ethics of his role in representing his experiences, and those of his father. These thematic insights also resonate through the text's formal qualities. *Maus* teaches us to doubt the 'normality' that it draws on, troubling the parameters of trauma's 'end': it plays with the historical connotation of comics with the trivial, quotidian and juvenile, and it makes use of cats and mice as key figures (implicitly referencing *Tom and Jerry* and the disturbing innocence of normal Saturday mornings, and their cartoons).

Later in Book II Chapter II (1996: 205), Art is shown in conversation with his 'shrink,' who also wears a mouse mask. The panels flick back and forth in the manner of a cinematic 'two-shot' so that only the back of one mask is shown at any one time. This has the effect of shifting in and out of the perception of real and masked. The psychiatrist – a Czech Jew, a survivor of Terezin and Auschwitz (1996: 203) – is a bigger mouse, their relative size emphasizing that Art feels small and beleaguered. The two speak of the complexities involved in 'admiring' survivors for surviving: Art's psychiatrist asks if that means 'it's *not* admirable to *not* survive?' They also discuss the tendency to blame the victim; the psychiatrist suggests that the victims cannot tell their stories, and perhaps it is better to have no more stories. The focus shifts to Art, who quotes Samuel Beckett: 'every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness'. In the next panel the two sit wordless

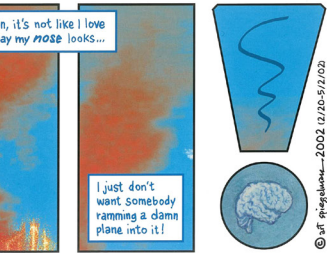
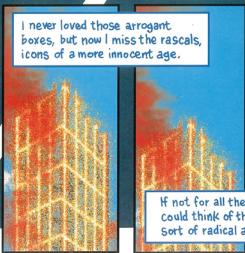
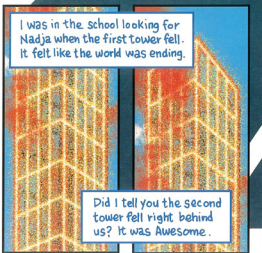
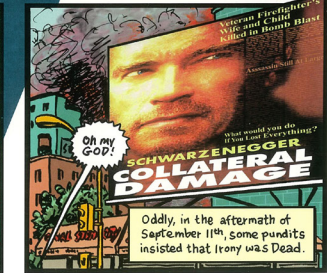
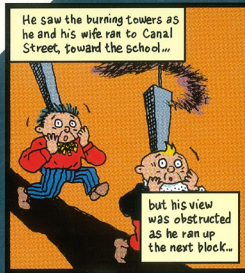
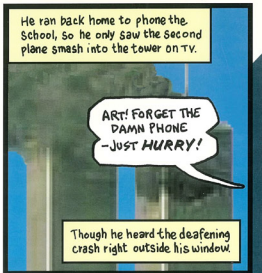
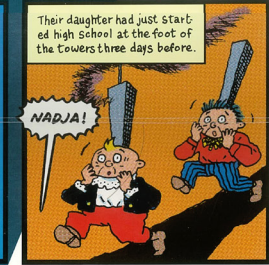
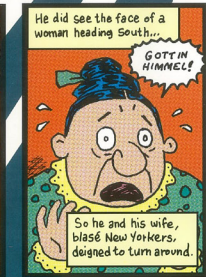
with just the smoke from their cigarettes and pipe flowing up into the air. This is the only panel in the book without words or some other sign denoting words (Young 1998: 687). In the page's final panel, Art points out the obvious irony: 'On the other hand, he *said* it'. The psychiatrist suggests Art put the Beckett quotation in his book. The humour in this section arises from the text's own enactment of silence, the 'beat' in which language is stilled. The two final statements enact an escape from the frame of representation, the speakers gesturing outside of Beckett's quotation (to the fact of him speaking) and outside of the narrative (towards the reader's awareness that the quotation made it into the graphic novel). These two gestures highlight the act of representation itself, suggesting, and then ironically and graphically deconstructing, the common trope of trauma's *unrepresentability*.

In Chapter III of Book II of *Maus*, Art and his wife Francoise visit Vladek at his summer home after his second wife Mala has just left him, and take him on a drive to the grocery store. On the drive home, Vladek narrates the story of his time at Dachau: suffering extreme hunger and typhus, and having to walk over dead bodies (1996: 255) before his train evacuation to the Swiss border. His story is abruptly interrupted when Francoise stops for a hitchhiker, and Vladek is horrified by the prospect of a 'schvartser' stealing his groceries. When confronted by Francoise for his racism ('How can you of all people be such a racist? You talk about blacks the way the Nazis talked about the Jews!') Vladek replies 'I thought really you are more smart than this, Francoise. It's not even to compare, the Shvartsers and the Jews!' (1996: 256). The abrupt shift between his account of suffering and survival raises the question of what makes a 'good' trauma subject, and how our expectations of that subject can be radically questioned or displaced.

Image (over page): IN THE SHADOW OF NO TOWERS by Art Spiegelman (Viking 2004). Copyright © Art Spiegelman, 2004. Reproduced by permission of Penguin Books Ltd. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc. Any third party use of this material, outside of this publication, is prohibited. Interested parties must apply directly to Random House, Inc. for permission.



IN THE SHADOW OF NO TOWERS



Rather than clearly delimiting the trauma of the ‘event’ of the Holocaust from the trauma of everyday racism, and privileging the former, Spiegelman instead develops an aesthetic of connection between genocidal events and ongoing practices of post-slavery racism in late-capitalist America. Harm and suffering are represented as wide, present and material, rather than as always-already defined by an event that is confined to the past.

4 In the Shadow of No Towers: The Event that Eludes Capture

In the Shadow of No Towers is not a sequential narrative in graphic form, as *Maus* is, but was originally written as a series of discrete episodes, and later collected into a book (Chute 2007: 230). The book consists of two parts. The first half is an account of the artist’s harrowing experience on 9/11, when Spiegelman witnessed the attacks on the World Trade Centre from close range as he rushed to collect his daughter from her school at the base of the towers. This narrative sits alongside strips exploring the activities of the Bush administration up until August 31, 2003. The large folio-sized pages, intended to be read like broadsheet pages, are divided into irregularly spread frames or panels. Each large page contains several different strips which run in different directions, such that the reader’s eye doesn’t know where to look immediately, and must find its way around the non-linear array (see Chute 2007). Art sometimes appears as a conventional caricature (a few wavy brush strokes for his hair, some dots for his stubble), and other times as his anthropomorphized ‘Maus’ self. Similarly, his narrative switches back and forth from third person to first person. The only consistent visual theme in these first ten pages is a central image which recurs on each page, which Spiegelman claims he ‘actually saw’: the ‘pivotal image... that didn’t get photographed or videotaped into public memory but still remains burned into the inside of my eyelids several years later— ... the image of the looming North Tower’s glowing bones just before it vaporized’ (2004: preface).

The second half of *No Towers* begins with a monograph on the Sunday newspaper comic strips of the early 20th century, in which Spiegelman ‘found solace’ after 9/11. This is followed by a ‘Comic Supplement’ compilation of seven Sunday newspaper strips dealing with war, patriotism, Arabs, Lower Manhattan and buildings threatening to fall. The original Park Row figures from a century earlier – including Yellowkid, The Katzenjammer Kids, Happy Hooligan, Little Nemo in Slumberland and Krazy Kat – appear in parable-like stories set in the aftermath of 9/11. One notable strip is drawn in the style of the Katzenjammer Kids. Entitled ‘Remember those Dead and Cuddly Tower Twins’, it shows the Tower Twins in a panic because they’re on fire. Uncle Sam throws oil on the flames, but then becomes preoccupied with a hornet’s nest while the twins burn to skeletons. All three are attacked by the hornets, with Uncle Sam briefly distracted by a roach with the head of Saddam Hussein. The Tower Twins tell him that this is ‘the wrong bug’ (2004: 5). Spiegelman forces the reader to turn the text upside down to finish the story (2004: 7). The ‘Tower Twins’ strip isn’t the only reference to vintage comics. Art is later depicted waking up in mouse form, as if from a dream in the style of *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (2004: 6-7) and in ‘Marital Blitz’ he appears, in the form of the old comics ‘Bringing Up Father’ character, obsessing over conspiracy-theory websites. These vintage characters seem to have been dislodged from their historical moment by 9/11 which has disrupted both temporal and stylistic boundaries: they are out of time and out of place (Versluis 2006: 991).

Spiegelman sets up several resonances between the trauma he explored in *Maus* and 9/11. He reflects upon how, in the days after the collapse of the twin towers, he began to grow attached to the neighborhood from which he, as a ‘rootless cosmopolitan,’ had always felt detached: ‘I finally understand why some Jews didn’t leave Berlin right after Kristallnacht!’ (2004: 4). One page is arranged around the theme of smelling smoke (2004: 3). One strip shows Art recalling his father saying that the smoke in Auschwitz was ‘indescribable’. In the following panel, Art sits there with a cigarette, its smoke fumes rising above him, and he has no words – foregrounding the limit of

representation in the same way as in *Maus*. He then looks at the reader and says: 'That's exactly what the air in Lower Manhattan smelled like after Sept 11' (2004:3).

Spiegelman is caught between two poles: on the one hand, the sense that trauma is unrepresentable, and on the other hand, that a trauma has *occurred*, and as an artist he cannot ignore his impulse to represent his personal experience of it. Sanyal writes that 'making the past knowable through bound representations can be violent, but there is an equal violence by claiming this unknowability (silence, trauma, shame) to be the underlying reality of psychic and historical constitution' (2002: 20). The claim that trauma is unknowable or unrepresentable can also facilitate modes of identification and appropriation. An ethical response demands the acknowledgment that 'the past continues to reverberate in the aftermath of events, and this reverberation recalls us to our entanglement, or 'implication,' with other selves and other histories' (Sanyal 2002: 20). Rather than fetishise the figures of gap, aporia, or silence, we need to push for new forms to speak a new understanding (and politics) of trauma. *No Towers* reflects this imperative: its very form plays with presence and absence. The book's imposing folio-size and thick cardboard paper suggest the enormity and tactility of the event, where the famous black absences on the cover seem to preserve the absence or inaccessibility of it. While the towers visually dominate several of the pages, his scattered comic strips suggest that such large events can only be conceived in short 'bursts' of intelligibility. The burning tower right before it crumbles, the threshold moment between tower and not-tower, appears on each of the first 10 pages, progressively taking a smaller part of the picture, and concludes with a three-panel sequence of the glowing tower progressively collapsing into obscurity, fading to black oblivion. 'On 9/11/01 time stopped' reads the caption at the top of the last strip (2004: 10).

As a traumatic event, 9/11 was intensely *visual*. Visibility was understood to be a key part of the terrorists' aims, and the diffusion of the image of the attacks through worldwide media personally implicated each viewer (Campbell 2001, McMillan 2004). Spiegelman

visually demonstrates the difference between his eye-witness experience in New York and his perception of what else happened that day: he hears about the attack on the Pentagon while at his daughter's school, but can only imagine it by reference to a vintage *Mars Attacks* trading card. Spiegelman experiences the event as mediated by popular culture, thinking of the Pentagon in terms of culturally-mediated symbols (2004: 3). In a long panel down the side of the page, Spiegelman is seen falling from the towers, reporting that, 'haunted by the images [he] didn't witness,' he tried to avoid 'the media images that threatened to engulf what [he] actually saw' (2004:6). To an even greater extent than *Maus*, *No Towers* suggests that trauma is not transmissible through words or images, except if the representation somehow addresses its own adequacy or limitations, not only at the level of theme but also style and texture. The multiple images on the pages of *No Towers* do not provide a more complete view of the events and experiences described. They remain unresolved, but as such they are paradoxically more able to communicate the trauma of disconnection that the book attempts to convey.

The formal properties of comic frames seem to promise some kind of order – as Spiegelman said in the wake of 9/11, 'if I thought in page units, I might live long enough to do another page' (qtd Chute 2006: 203). But the book also constantly thematises the graphic novel's conventional division of time into discrete units. The title of each of the first pages of the book describes a positioning in time: 'Waiting for the other shoe to drop' (2004:1). On page 1, the swaying tower takes up the entire right hand side of the page, carved up by the frames of the panels, with a series of first person narrative statements that each allude to a different place in, measure of or perception of time. The first is 'My wife, my daughter and I are rushing from the bomb site,' while the next is 'Many months have passed. It's time to move on. ... I guess I'm finally up to September 20th'. It has taken him months to process up to around 9 days after the event. He is stuck in an unfolding drama, in the eventness of the event which insists it's not over: 'I'd feel like such a jerk if a new disaster strikes while I'm still chipping away at the last one' (2004: 1).

Spiegelman defines post traumatic stress disorder as ‘when Time stands still at the moment of trauma,’ and characterises it as ‘a totally reasonable response to current events’ (2004: 2). His narrative of witnessing the attack is told in small increments over the ten pages – ie. ‘They raced to their daughter’s school’. Some pages reference serialized comic books by providing a ‘synopsis’ but maintain an ironic distance on linear time: ‘In our last episode, as you might remember, Time stood Still’ (2004:3). Later, he writes ‘It’s almost two years later, and most New Yorkers seem to have picked up the rhythms of daily life ... but right under the surface, we’re all still just a bunch of stunned pigeons’ (2004: 9). He draws a conversation ‘overheard at a Tribeca party’ where a woman recounted how she was mugged, and felt ‘relieved’ because ‘things are finally getting back to normal’. He oscillates between understanding the event through a national scale and a personal scale: ‘Maybe I really WANT the world to end, to vindicate the fears I felt back on 9/11! Maybe it’s just MY little world that ended ... but then I glance at the news and there’s absolutely no doubt ... THE SKY IS FALLING!’ (2004: 9). The final page deals with the relationship of memory and forgetting: ‘Nothing like commemorating an event to help you forget it’ (2004: 10).

In *No Towers* Spiegelman describes suffering two distinct but related traumas – the attacks on 9/11, and the United States government’s response in invading Afghanistan and Iraq. He speaks of both traumas as a ‘hijackings’ (2004: 9) (the first by terrorists, the second by the Bush oil cabal) and describes being as ‘equally terrorized’ (2004: 2) by Al-Qaeda as he is by own government. The central theme of *No Towers* is traumas and wounds which cannot be closed off and contained. When the United States invaded Iraq, these ‘new traumas began competing with still-fresh wounds’. The image of traumas and wounds is continued on the flyleaf of the book which is a reprint of the front page of the New York newspaper *The World* from 11 September 1902. Referring to the shooting of President William McKinley, it includes a report on the surgeons having to remove a number of stitches in order to clean McKinley’s bullet wound. This story provides a dramatic image of history as a series of wounds which never quite heal (Versluys: 982).

Spiegelman eventually decides that ‘it wasn’t essential to know precisely how much my “leaders” knew about the hijackings in advance – it was sufficient that they immediately instrumentalized the attack for their own agenda’ (2004: preface). For Spiegelman, it makes little difference whether 9/11 was the result of a conspiracy of Muslim extremists, as reported by the CIA and FBI (and adhered to by mainstream media), or one perpetrated by military, CIA, and administration insiders (as ‘conspiracy theorists’ argue). He thus rejects grand meta-narratives that would provide some sense of coherence and restore a clear opposition between good and evil. As Karen Espiritu argues, the non-linearity of *No Towers* ‘disrupt[s] the very concept of establishing a particular narrative; and in this way... it resists or even unlearns the very fixity of narratives, of the memory and recollection of trauma itself’ (2006: 183). Spiegelman’s turn to the details of everyday life resists nationalist identities in favour of a ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ (Orbán 73): a local, contingent, shared narrative that is never unified or complete (Gournelos 2011: 95). The multiple images in *No Towers* point to the numerous effects of trauma on ongoing legal, political and social life, and to the ethical demands to pay attention to a plurality of its effects—as matters of justice, derived and emphasized partly from a new aesthetics.

Conclusion: Querying the Event, and the Justice of the Everyday

Spiegelman’s work draws attention to the relation of form to substance, thematising the experience of both writing and reading representations of trauma. The ‘possession’ of the traumatized subject by images – noted by theorists such as Caruth (1995: 4) – is complicated by the comix form, which forces an engagement between images and the written text, and makes available the experience of a number of narratives and tropes simultaneously.² One of the effects of these formal qualities is to challenge the centrality of ‘the event’ in the schema of trauma studies. The comix form also generates an aesthetic of connection, which places the trauma of the event alongside pervasive ‘everyday’ traumas,

and holds together a number of temporal effects and relationships, complicating our understanding of traumatic effects. Taken together, *Maus* and *In the Shadow of No Towers* query the eventness of the event – its implicit static qualities in the case of *Maus*, and its locatedness in the case of *No Towers* – and promote an aesthetic of everyday trauma.

The tensions and co-productions that take place between the event and the everyday are ambiguous and continually troubling. By not limiting his representation to the traumatic event, and being interested in ongoing traumas, Spiegelman rejects the gesture of determining or containing meaning, but this does not mean he offers us the gap, or silence, as a dominant trope. Rather, Spiegelman offers multiple narratives and figures to represent the multiple effects of the traumatic. Spiegelman draws our attention to the problems of containing, fixing, and formalizing the event. This strategy also has the effect of challenging roles; in *Maus*, Vladek is the survivor who is not a straightforward victim but a character who also inflicts suffering on others. Through the character of Art, Spiegelman also thematises the complicated ethics involved when creating representations of trauma – in his case, the artist's success occurs on and through the suffering of others, but the same can also be said of the theorist, or even the jurist. *No Towers* suggests that trauma is not made transparent through words or images, and that its nature cannot be taken for granted. Further, the boundaries of representation are shown to have less to do with perceived structural limitations of trauma, and more to do with political decisions (such as the violence of the American government's decision to invade Afghanistan).

The law as it currently exists would be thoroughly transformed were it to dispense with artificial boundaries and acknowledge the claims of everyday violence, the shocks and tolls of poverty and late-capitalist lives, of endemic sexual, racialised and historical violence – trauma being 'part of the affective language that describes life under capitalism' (Cvetkovich 2002: 19). The law would need to radically change its frameworks of reference were it to admit that 'our culture is a factory for the production of so many walking wounded'

(Brown 1995, 103). It exists as it does by containing the recognition of certain harms, supported by a particular understanding of trauma. What Spiegelman's work offers is a counterpoint to this containment, a lesson in the nature of the justice that is being delivered, as well as that which is being denied.

Notes

- 1 Hilary Chute prefers the term 'graphic narrative' in relation to *Maus*, because it is non-fiction (Chute 2007: 229).
- 2 Chute provides a textured theorization of the relationship between Caruth's theories and the comix form in her works, especially 2007 and 2010.

References

- Baxter K 2011 'Memory and Photography: Rethinking Postcolonial Trauma Studies.' *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47/1: 18-29
- Brown J 1988 'Of Mice and Memory' *Oral History Review* 16/1: 91-109
- Brown L 1995 'Not outside the range: One feminist perspective on psychic trauma' in Caruth C ed 1995 *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* Johns Hopkins University Press Baltimore
- Campbell D 2001 'Imaging the real, struggling for meaning' retrieved from <http://www.david-campbell.org/2011/09/08/9-11-imaging-the-real/>
- Caruth C ed 1995 *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* Johns Hopkins University Press Baltimore
- 1996 *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* University Press Baltimore
- Chute H 2010 *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* Columbia University Press
- 2007 'Temporality and Seriality in Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*' *American Periodicals* 17/2: 228-244
- 2006 "'The Shadow of a Past Time': History and Graphic Representation in *Maus*" *Twentieth-Century Literature* 52/2:199-230

- Cvetkovich A 2002 *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* Duke University Press Durham
- Dimock W 1996 *Residues of Justice: Literature, Law, Philosophy* University of California Press Berkeley
- Erichsen J 1867 *On Railway and Other Injuries of the Nervous System* Lea Publishing Philadelphia
- Espiritu K 2006 "Putting Grief into Boxes": Trauma and the Crisis of Democracy in Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*' *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 28/2: 179-201.
- Felman S 2002 *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* Harvard University Press Cambridge
- Forster G 2007 'Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form' *Narrative* 15/3: 259-85
- Geis D R ed 2003 *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor's Tale" of the Holocaust* University of Alabama Press Tuscaloosa
- Goodrich P and Delage C eds 2012 *The Scene of the Trial: History, Trauma, Mass Crimes* Routledge New York
- Gournelos T 2011 'Laughs, Tears and Breakfast Cereals: Rethinking Trauma and Post-9/11 Politics in Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*' in Gournelos T and Greene V eds. 2011: 81-98
- and Greene V eds. 2011 *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America* University of Mississippi Press Jackson
- Hartman G 2006 'The Humanities of Testimony: An Introduction' *Poetics Today* 27/2: 249-60
- Herman J 1997 *Trauma and Recovery* Basic Books New York
- Hirsch M 1993 'Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning and Post-Memory' *Discourse* 15/2: 3-29.
- 2008 'The Generation of Postmemory' 29/1: 103-128
- Hocking B and Smith A 1995 'From Coultas to Alcock and Beyond: Will Tort Law Fail Women?' *Queensland University of Technology Law Journal* 11: 12-156
- Huyssen A 2000 'Of Mice and Mimesis: Reading Spiegelman with Adorno' *New German Critique* 81: 65-82.

- Kennedy R 2008 'Subversive Witnessing: Mediating Indigenous Testimony in Australian Cultural and Legal Institutions' *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36: 58.
- Kuhlman M 2007 'The Traumatic Temporality of Art Spiegelman's In the Shadow of No Towers' *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40/5: 849-66
- LaCapra D 1994 *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory Trauma* Cornell University Press Ithaca
- 2001 *Writing History, Writing Trauma* Johns Hopkins University Press Baltimore
- Laub D and Felman S 1992 *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* Routledge London
- Luckhurst R 2008 *The Trauma Question* Routledge London
- McCloud S 1993 *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* Harper Collins New York
- McGlothlin E 2003 'No Time Like the Present: Narrative and Time in Art Spiegelman's Maus' *Narrative* 11/2: 177-98
- McMillan N 2004 'Beyond the Frame: Cultural Representations of the "September 11" Attacks' *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 37/3: 380-400
- Ní Aoláin F D 2009 'Exploring a Feminist Theory of Harm in the Context of Conflicted and Post-Conflict Societies' *Queens Law Journal* 35: 219-244
- Orbán K 2007 'Trauma and Visuality: Art Spiegelman's Maus and In the Shadow of No Towers' *Representations* 97: 57-89
- Ross F 2003 *Bearing Witness: Women and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa* Pluto Press London
- Rothberg M 2000 *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* University of Minnesota Press Minneapolis
- 2008 'Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A Response' *Studies in the Novel* 40/1-2: 224-34
- 2009 *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* Stanford University Press Stanford
- Spiegelman A 1996 *The Complete Maus* Pantheon Books New York
- 2004 *In the Shadow of No Towers* Pantheon Books New York
- 2011 *MetaMaus* Pantheon Books New York

- Stringer D 2010 *'Not Even Past': Race, Historical Trauma, and Subjectivity in Faulkner, Larsen and Van Vechten* New York: Fordham University Press
- Sturken M 1997 *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* University of California Press Berkeley
- Sarat A, Davidovitch N and Alberstein M eds 2007 *Trauma and Memory: Reading, Healing, and Making Law* Stanford University Press Stanford
- Versluys K 2006 'Art Spiegelman's In the Shadow of No Towers: 9/11 and the Representation of Trauma' *Modern Fiction Studies* 52/4: 980-1003
- Vickroy L 2002 *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* University of Virginia Press Charlottesville
- Whitehead A 2004 *Trauma Fiction* Edinburgh University Press Edinburgh
- Young J E 1998 'The Holocaust as Vicarious Past: Art Spiegelman and the Afterimages of History' *Critical Inquiry* 24/4: 666-699